



**KHUNU LAMA TENZIN GYALTSEN  
RINPOCHE, INDIA, CIRCA 1977. PHOTO  
COURTESY OF  
LAMA YESHE WISDOM ARCHIVE.**



# THE LIFE OF A BODHISATTVA: The Great Kindness of Khunu Lama Rinpoche

BY BETH HALFORD

*Beth Halford, an FPMT student who was staying at Root Institute in Bodhgaya, India, in March 2015, was fortunate to interview Ven. Thubten Tsewang, known as Baling Lama, a disciple of and attendant to the Indian Buddhist master Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltsen Rinpoche (1894-1977). Baling Lama is now 80 years old. He worked in radio broadcasting in Ladakh, India, before meeting Khunu Lama in 1954. After meeting Khunu Lama, Baling Lama ordained and became a devoted disciple for six years. He then became Khunu Lama's attendant in 1960.*

*During the interview, Baling Lama shared many vignettes of Khunu Lama that offer insight into the life and practices of this unusual and important Buddhist master. "Listening to Baling Lama recount his time spent with Khunu Lama with smiles breaking across his face and eyes sparkling with affection was incredibly inspiring," Beth told Mandala. "These highly realized lamas of the more modern times can be extremely motivating and powerful if we open our hearts to their stories and the meaning of their lives."*

*Here is the story of Khunu Lama as told by Baling Lama.*

## Khunu Lama Tenzin Gyaltsen Rinpoche

was born in 1894 in the village of Sunnam, Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh, in the western Himalayas of India, not far from the Tibetan border. Born into a noble and wealthy family, he grew up in this very remote area, where despite not being officially recognized as a tulku, his fellow villagers saw signs of his special qualities from an early age through his unusual interest in Dharma activities and his wisdom and kindness.

In his early years, Khunu Lama lived a comfortable life with his family. But in his late teenage years, his family faced difficulties, culminating with him leaving the family home. This opened the door of opportunity for Khunu Lama to pursue spiritual studies and so his life of Dharma began. Upon renouncing his former life, he left home with nothing, traveling to Manali to collect money he knew was owed to his family and using it to travel to Gangtok in Sikkim,

where he planned to start his Dharma studies.

However, soon after his arrival, Khunu Lama realized he wouldn't be able to develop a true and deep understanding of Dharma until he knew how to read and write properly. This became the purpose of his time in Gangtok. And this perspective on literacy, grammar and composition became one he regularly taught others.

Once Khunu Lama felt he had enough of a general education to effectively learn Dharma, he traveled to Tibet, spending many years going between Tashi Lhunpo in Shigatse and the Kham region, and also spending some time in Lhasa. In Tibet, he received teachings and initiations from many great teachers of the time, becoming a highly respected student and teacher, perfecting his Tibetan language skills and becoming a scholar of Dharma texts.

"Khunu Lama met and received teachings from many highly realized and respected lamas, but he never mentioned that he had taken any as



Ven. Thubten Tsewang, who is known as Baling Lama, Root Institute, Bodhgaya, India, April 2015. Photo by Andy Melnic.

his root guru nor did he talk about his gurus in general,” Baling Lama said. He did, however, encourage others to choose a root guru carefully, in order to ensure the teacher was someone who had cultivated true bodhichitta in his heart. Khunu Lama would make it clear that the teacher didn’t have to be a well-known lama, but it was the feeling in a teacher’s heart that mattered. Khunu Lama’s example of not talking about his gurus is a strong teaching on the importance of not sharing certain aspects of practice and experiences with Dharma. “This avoids making something that should be very special into a worldly thing,” Baling Lama explained.

Despite Khunu Lama’s outward appearance of a lay beggar and his immense humbleness, many high lamas and realized practitioners in Tibet could see beyond this and would invite him to teach, recognizing his inner qualities and wishing to learn from them. He adopted this appearance to show how someone who looked like a layperson could renounce worldly things, practice Dharma with determination and attain realizations. He aimed to inspire lay people, particularly Himalayans, to live like this, to realize their potential to practice the path to enlightenment in the most effective and beneficial way. “At that time,” Baling Lama said, “many people in Himalayan and Tibetan society thought that monks were the only ones who could practice Dharma. As a consequence, the lay people would keep their practice simple, superficially reading texts and performing rituals.”

Although Khunu Lama had become a great scholar of the time, he felt a need to deepen his knowledge of Dharma beyond the intellectual. Studying in the Tibetan language, he felt, was restricting him from doing so. Knowing that the roots of Buddhism were anchored in Sanskrit, Khunu Lama traveled to Varanasi to perfect his knowledge of that language and in turn intensify his understanding of Dharma.

Khunu Lama spent many years living as an ascetic in a Hindu temple in Varanasi, while also becoming a scholar in Sanskrit and professor at Sarnath University. Here he wrote his book *The Jewel Lamp: A Praise of Bodhichitta*. (This book appears in English at *Vast as the Heavens, Deep at the Sea*; see page 33.) After the book’s publication in Tibetan in 1966, his reputation as a great scholar and teacher began to spread throughout India with many disciples coming to benefit from his incredible kindness, compassion and wisdom by way of teachings and blessings.

It was also here in Varanasi where Baling Lama met Khunu Lama for the first time in 1954. During their meeting Khunu Lama asked if Baling Lama wished to ordain as a monk and live a spiritual lifestyle. Baling Lama expressed a deep wish to do so but also shared his reservations. He told Khunu Lama that he wanted to keep his job and regular income. “In response, Khunu Lama applied his great wisdom, asking me a simple question: Did I feel I had more wealth to renounce than Atisha or Siddhartha Gautama? Of course, I did not. And on realizing this, I understood that if Atisha and Siddhartha Gautama could renounce it all, then I could too.”

Khunu Lama continued to live a humble life, teaching and studying, until once while in Bodhgaya, His Holiness Dalai Lama, surrounded by a crowd of people, prostrated to Khunu Lama in the middle of a road. This immediately brought him to the attention of many and changed Khunu Lama’s life from one of quiet asceticism to near-celebrity status. Prior to this public display of immense respect, His Holiness requested Khunu Lama to give him a transmission of Shantideva’s *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*, also known as *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. During this transmission, His Holiness was so overwhelmed by Khunu Lama’s knowledge of the text, level of compassion and purity of mind that His

Holiness asked for a commentary to be provided with the text.

His Holiness also requested Khunu Lama to pray for the people of Tibet. Khunu Lama, however, rejected this request in his ever humble way, explaining he couldn’t possibly pray for them as His Holiness was the leader of the Tibetan people and should therefore be the one to pray for them. Baling Lama recounted that through Khunu Lama’s great compassion, he offered to pray for bodhichitta to flourish in the heart of the leader of China with the hope that Mao Zedong would see the error of his ways and free the people of Tibet.

In addition to his boundless compassion, Khunu Lama would show incredible generosity. He gave all he had to those in need while refusing to accept most monetary offerings and passing on food offerings to those he saw as more in need. Baling Lama recalled how Khunu Lama would only cut his hair and shave his face once a month, always visiting the same barber who would charge 50 *paise* (half a rupee) for the cut. Throughout the month he would save what little offerings he accepted with the intention to pay the hard-working barber 50 rupees each visit, far more than the barber ever asked for. Initially thinking Khunu Lama must be crazy, the barber gradually came to realize it was actually a sign of incredible generosity. He was most grateful when people queued up to receive haircuts from the great Khunu Lama’s barber once he was famous. Khunu Lama’s generosity reached countless people through his tireless acts of kindness, teachings and practices. Whenever students came to see him he would give transmissions of mantras, sutras or prayers, trying to make each visit as beneficial as possible.

Khunu Lama’s unusual and simple approach to life wasn’t limited to the way he dressed or groomed himself. Choosing not to own any holy objects or statues of any kind, his practice centered on the text



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“May I be a bridge for  
everyone who wants to  
cross the water.”

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Illustration by Tenzin Norbu from *Shantideva: How to Wake Up a Hero*, by Dominique Townsend, published by Wisdom Publications in July 2015.

**KHUNU LAMA  
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he revered the most, Shantideva's *Bodhisattva-charyavatara*. Baling Lama explained Khunu Lama would always say there was no need to have statues if the mind truly appreciates and internalizes the qualities of the Buddha; after all, how could a statue truly encapsulate all of these qualities and integrate them into the mind?

Khunu Lama would say there was no harm in people having statues if it helped remind them of the qualities of the Buddha, but they needed to already have some appreciation of these qualities, otherwise they would not serve to remind them of anything. Without true understanding it would just be a piece of metal with no real benefits. Baling Lama likened it to crossing an ocean. If we haven't yet crossed, we will need a boat to get to the other side, but if we have already reached the other side, there is no need for a boat.

Khunu Lama would never participate in formal retreat. Instead, Khunu Lama's whole life was like an inner retreat. If he was requested to give a teaching or felt there would be benefit for him to give one, he would break his practice to do so. The rest of the time he would practice, focusing on *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. Day and night he would read and meditate on its pages. Khunu Lama was never seen sleeping by Baling Lama, only pausing to eat and, on rare occasions, rest his head in front of the text.

Khunu Lama would encourage people to make every moment of their life a retreat. This meant creating space in the unruly mind, allowing it to slow down and experience a greater clarity, so its negative aspect declined and its positive aspect grew. "Whenever this happens," Baling Lama explained, "we are in retreat." Khunu Rinpoche also seemed to be suggesting that labeling a specific period as "retreat" can provide a different emphasis for our practice, but this is not necessarily one that is entirely beneficial. Instead, if one appreciates the potential for every moment to be retreat, life naturally becomes powerfully rooted in Dharma and most beneficial.

To ensure he did not waste precious time, Khunu Lama would only eat once a day, boiling water in a small army mug before adding a little milk, sugar, butter and *tsampa* – roasted barely

flour – which he would eat straight from the mug. Baling Lama recalled one occasion when Khunu Lama surprised him by expressing a wish to eat dahl and rice. Khunu Lama went to the market to buy the ingredients and cooked it himself. After finishing only half of the meal, he offered the rest to Baling Lama. As he started to eat, Baling Lama soon realized the food was only half cooked; the lentils and rice were still hard. As it was an offering from his guru, he respectfully finished it all, but wondered why Khunu Lama had eaten something so undercooked. Once Baling Lama had finished, Khunu Lama explained that precious time should not be wasted on cooking food that wasn't needed; it should always be used to practice Dharma in the most beneficial way.

Life wasn't easy for Khunu Lama. Despite his reputation as a highly realized lama, many still questioned his authenticity due to his appearance. Baling Lama said that places Khunu Lama tried to stay at would refuse him entry and people often harassed him if he meditated in public, throwing stones and kicking him. Khunu Lama's incredible kindness and patience would shine through as he failed to react to such encounters, only ever calmly wishing his attackers well. "Khunu Lama lived every moment in equanimity with no judgement, criticism or differentiation between high lamas and beggars, treating each with equal respect, compassion and kindness," said Baling Lama.

As a non-believer in the lineage system, Khunu Lama described himself as neither Nyingma, Kagyü, Sakya nor Gelug, but rather a disciple of Nagarjuna. He didn't agree with the emphasis people tended to place on the lineage leaders and how they would often forget the importance of Shakyamuni Buddha. To help remind people, he would give a copy of "Praise to Shakyamuni Buddha" to everyone who visited him whoever they were, even His Holiness the 16th Karmapa from the Kagyü school.

Having lived an extraordinary life in a number of ways, Khunu Lama Rinpoche was giving a teaching in the western Himalayas when he suddenly became sick and returned to his room. Baling Lama said that Khunu Lama sat there in meditation until a student came into



the room and tried to rouse him. Khunu Lama's body crumpled from the touch, giving the appearance of death.

The body was covered in salt and left lying down for three days without any signs of decomposition during that time. It was his disciples' wish to take the body to a more populated area for the funeral rites. They carried the body for 24 hours to a helipad, but the helicopter couldn't land due to bad weather, so they carried the body back. They tried again several days later, but the helicopter still couldn't land, so they performed the rituals where he died.

People wanted to travel to the funeral, but many were unable due to the weather conditions. Despite this, approximately

1,000 people attended the funeral. Baling Lama said that there were no high lamas present with the right experience to perform the full funeral rites and other practices surrounding Khunu Lama's death, but those present did their best to perform pujas, prayers and other practices to help with Khunu Lama's passing.

When cremated, Khunu Lama's body sat in meditation posture. The fire destroyed the skin, flesh and bones of the lower half of the body, but the skeleton from the hips and above stayed completely intact and upright. His heart and tongue also remained and are now kept in a stupa near his family's house where he was born.

Much of Khunu Lama's life as told by Baling Lama is a manifestation of verses in *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*. His Holiness the Dalai Lama called Khunu Lama a modern-day Shantideva in recognition of his profound practice of bodhichitta. It serves as inspiration to see how Khunu Lama dedicated his life to studying and actualizing the practices of a bodhisattva.

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Beth Halford is the CEO of a UK-based charity that operates in Nepal and a qualified physiotherapist. She also helps coordinate social work efforts for FPMT projects in India and Nepal. She lives mostly between Nepal, India and the UK. Beth met the Dharma in early 2013 and has been a student of Lama Zopa Rinpoche since completing the 2013 one-month November course at Kopan Monastery in Nepal.







**LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE AND BALING  
LAMA MAKING OFFERINGS AT THE  
MAHABODHI STUPA, BODHGAYA,  
INDIA, 2015.**  
PHOTO BY ANDY MELNIC.